

**NEAR EAST SOUTH ASIA CENTER FOR STRATEGIC
STUDIES**

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***Note – The views expressed are my own and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Department of Defense.**

Pakistan – “The War Within”

“At an increasingly alarming rate, the writ of the state and the ability of its organs to uphold fundamental rights of citizens are being eroded. And yet we remain in a state of denial...” -- Najmudoin Shaikh, former Pakistani Foreign Secretary

Pakistan today arguably presents the United States with its greatest global strategic challenge. The second largest Islamic country in the world with a population exceeding 160 million – and one armed with nuclear weapons – a meltdown of government and society in Pakistan would rapidly become the preeminent national security threat facing the United States. Events in Pakistan are spiraling out of control, and our options in reversing the downward acceleration are limited at best.

Denial and Disbelief

Often hidden by the shadow of the war in Afghanistan during much of the past eight years, Pakistan has in the last year paradoxically transformed itself into both a democratically elected civilian-led state after nearly a decade of military rule, and yet one now under siege from extremist militants who threaten to upend the very existence of the state itself. Whereas less than four years

ago, Taliban and Al Qaeda extremists were largely confined to the most remote areas bordering Afghanistan, today a creeping “Talibanization” is threatening to encroach into every segment of Pakistani territory and society.

The bloody ending to the 2007 siege of the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in the heart of Islamabad gave notice that violent extremism was no longer containable by Pakistani security forces, and that even the most secular and modernized regions of the country were at risk. For years, the Pakistan intelligence and security services have viewed the Taliban and associated extremist groups as their tools in the long term struggle with India – forces that could be generated, shaped and directed to serve the interests of the Pakistani state. That day is now irrevocably over. A struggle for the very soul of Pakistan has commenced, and the state of Pakistan has a fatally weak hand to play in this conflict. A key role of the United States and our international friends and allies must be to strengthen this hand.

Compounding this challenge to the Pakistani state is the internally conflicted nature of Pakistan regarding the extremist threat. Extremist forces exemplified by the Taliban but also including such disparate but associated groups as the Haqqani network, Al Qaeda, Laskar e Taiba, TNSM, or the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan have successfully cloaked themselves in the piety of the Islamic faith, while taking on roles and actions that violate many of Islam’s basic precepts. Tragically, there are no substantive moderate voices representing more moderate views of

Islam and its teachings; the field is wholly uncontested. Where such voices speak out, they are intimidated or killed by those who are simply co-opting conservative Islamic belief to buttress their positions of power. The recent so-called “peace agreement” signed by the Pakistani government that permits the province of Swat to be governed by extreme Sharia law exemplifies this trend. Perversely, that very province voted last year for strongly secular political leadership in an election that resoundingly rejected Islamist parties. The outcome of that election has been effectively reversed by Taliban power exercised solely through the barrel of a gun – an ominous trend that is inexorably moving from tribal areas toward the settled regions of Pakistan.

The Pakistani Security Services

The Pakistani military and intelligence services today find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, the extremists groups that are now beginning to threaten directly the writ of the central government are groups of their own creation – created both to prosecute the conflict with India in Kashmir (and more indirectly, Afghanistan) and at one time to fight the Soviets at the behest of the U.S. The fundamental premise of the Pakistani security services has long been: “we can control these forces.” Unfortunately, the viral and burgeoning forces unleashed today can no longer be controlled, and the Pakistani military has been slow to grasp this change.

On the other hand, the Pakistani military is profoundly ambivalent about fighting Islamist militants on Pakistan's soil. Whereas the Pakistani Army of the late 20th Century was a solidly secular institution, the Army of today is both far more religious and more anti-American. 12 years of sanctions had the unintended consequence of depriving a generation of Pakistani junior officers – the “Lost Generation” – of exposure to U.S. military education and an appreciation for our respect of human rights, civilian control and a host of doctrinal fundamentals. Fighting fellow Islamic “miscreants” is deeply unpopular among the rank and file of the military, especially since such combat is often viewed as simply fighting “America's war.” There remains a strong conviction (which contributes to Pakistani denial of the threat) that the spiraling terrorist attacks spreading across Pakistan would somehow end if Pakistan stopped supporting the United States in its war in Afghanistan.

Most centrally, the Pakistani military and intelligence services remain convinced that the prime enemy of Pakistan continues to be India. No experienced Pakistani security or political leaders truly believe in the depth of their hearts that the United States is a long-term player in the region, much less a reliable partner to Pakistan. The U.S. – Indian nuclear power agreement cemented this mistrust in Pakistan, and reversing this widely held dogma will be extraordinarily difficult if not impossible. In this perspective, all decisions must be reached based upon how those decisions will look the “day after” the United States leaves – again. Memories of 1989 remain fresh and painful

on both sides of the Afghan – Pakistan border, and the best American intentions and policies of today have difficulty competing with the unalterable recent U.S. history in the region.

Many of our emerging U.S. remedies for helping Pakistan counter their increasing internal terrorist threat (and by extension, support our aims in Afghanistan) revolve around improving the counter-insurgency capabilities of the Pakistani Army and Frontier Corps. This is an admirable goal for both forces, but we should remain coldly objective about its prospects for success.

At root, neither the Army nor the paramilitary Frontier Corps has serious incentive to improve its ability to fight against the very people who, in reality, comprise the recruiting ground for many of its rank and file soldiers. In a military socialized from day one to see India as the existential threat to the nation, stepping away from that ingrained outlook (and the weaponry, formations and doctrine that accompany it) is an immense and unwelcome change. Moreover, in an Army that has become more religious, more culturally sympathetic to the extremists and more anti-American, simply receiving more American training equipment and advice is unlikely to change the dynamics of battlefield success on the ground. Indeed, sometimes the Army's senior leadership does not even allow the U.S. to provide the training, fearing that perhaps it will result in an expansion of the U.S. presence. The Pakistani military has both problems of "will" as well as "skill." Pakistani corps commanders have embraced

terrorist leaders (e.g., Nek Muhammed) in signing feckless peace agreements designed to remove the Army from that which they were blatantly losing.

Senior Pakistani military leadership remain convinced that soon after NATO and the U.S. give up on Afghanistan, their intractable battle with India will once again resume – and that they must retain both the conventional (Army, nuclear weapons) and unconventional (counter-terrorist) capabilities to fight this next phase of the war. This sober estimation of Pakistani national interests after the expected withdrawal of international military forces from neighboring Afghanistan demands that they as professional military men be prepared to prepare for what comes next – in their view, a resumption of the cold (and occasionally hot) war with neighboring India.

Outcomes

There are few realistic positive outcomes imaginable for Pakistan over the next few years. Three possible scenarios frame the many possibilities:

State Failure: A combination of accelerating economic decline and terrorist violence fueled by ineffective leadership in Islamabad destroys the economic and political viability of the country. A return to military rule in an attempt to stabilize the situation leads to nation-wide protests and a popular revolt, led by hard-line Islamist factions. A radical Islamic revolutionary government emerges mirroring the 1996 Taliban takeover in

Afghanistan. Elites and the major portions of the middle class flee.

Stalemate: The descending spiral continues with some staunching of the economic bleeding by international financial supports. The military and intelligence services restore some degree of control over the insurgents and gain some counterinsurgency proficiency to gain leverage. Insurgent gains in Afghanistan provide depth to the Pakistani Taliban and other extremists. Weak political leadership continues with some growth of governing capacity. Peace deals with insurgents continue, but are limited to elements of the border provinces where the insurgents consolidate control.

Gradual Improvement: Pakistan achieves a political rapprochement with India. The economy is precariously stabilized. Civilian leadership gains a foothold and is buttressed by non-lethal U.S. and international aid. The Army recognizes that it no longer has political or financial support for major capabilities designed to fight India. In order to preserve force structure and military aid, it re-orientes key portions of the force to fight insurgents although actual combat actions are rare. Grudging support is provided for continued drone attacks. Allied success against the insurgents in Afghanistan weakens their leverage in Pakistan. Intelligence cooperation improves leading to more arrests of Al Qaeda leaders.

Prescriptions

Within a new overarching U.S. policy approach to “Af-Pak,” Pakistan requires its own strategy and its own solutions separate from but related to Afghanistan. The U.S. must assist Pakistan in managing change – economically, militarily, perhaps even societal – as it deals with immense problems brought about by a deadly combination of both internal and external factors.

First and foremost, the U.S. must objectively assess what factors are required to cause positive change in Pakistani decision-making regarding their internal extremist threat, and their relations with the United States. Altering the Pakistani Calculus – the “double game” – must be our first objective. Without demonstrable success on that front, any combination of U.S. leadership, new strategies or carefully targeted growth in resources is doomed to failure. The U.S. must lend its weight to a India-Pakistan rapprochement to deepen and make permanent the nascent effort of the Musharraf years.

The U.S. must also partner with the Pakistani government to develop a vision of a long-term strategic partnership between Pakistan and United States – not one simply based upon today’s transactional relationship anchored in fighting terrorists in the tribal areas. Much like the U.S. has evolved the idea of a long-term strategic partnership with India, commensurate effort must be invested into a parallel track with Pakistan – but not as a zero sum game. We can not continue to provide Pakistan with assistance and hope that simply they will take action against extremists. Pakistan must show its own commitment to the long-term

relationship by no longer hedging their relationships with us.

As to Pakistan's relationship to the conflict in Afghanistan, U.S. success in reversing the decline in Afghanistan and achieving success would increase our leverage with Pakistan. Arguably, much of the schizophrenic Pakistani approach to the Afghan conflict today is based upon their expectation that the U.S. and our allies lack staying power – and will move rapidly for the exits if failure is imminent. Success in Afghanistan might reverse that perception and lend much greater credibility to U.S. statements of long-term commitment.

Finally, continued and expanded resource support for the civil government of Pakistan and the security services – conditioned “lightly” to performance, but respectful of Pakistani sovereignty – is essential. Pakistan as a state on a trajectory leading toward failure – and the U.S. must prevent this option at almost all costs. That said, American aid detached from performance by the Pakistani government and military has proved fruitless. Reasonable benchmarks of Pakistani progress in using American (and other international aid) is a reasonable price for the willingness of American and other taxpayers to underwrite the future of Pakistan as a state. Pakistan is not fighting for the West – it is a nation fighting for its very survival. We cannot allow it to fail at this task.